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ABSTRACT

School board members can assist the change process in curriculum development by helping annually to set instructional goals through a variety of methods that could include management by objectives and community involvement. Board members can also help obtain community resources for career education, arts, and cultural programs. Another proper domain for board members is the change process where several strategies such as research development, community involvement, systems approach, alternative schools, consortiums, and strong leader approaches can be used. Finally, school board members can help establish a balanced curriculum through encouraging development of clusters that present basic skills; health, physical education, and leisure; career education; cultural studies; and societal studies. (Author/DW)

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THE BOARD'S CONCERN FOR CURRICULUM

Invited Address at the
National School Boards Association Convention
Miami Beach, Florida - April 20, 1975

By

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All but the very newest board members are aware of the various roles which have often been assumed by persons serving on boards of education. Collectively, these persons often have resulted in a fairly balanced group of people who govern a school district quite well if they have administrative leadership that can keep them pulling together. The accumulation of too many persons who concentrate on the same particular interest inevitably results in conflict or less attention on development of sound policy than on seeking to administer the school system.

You know the particular kinds of special interests of which I speak. Some board members see themselves as efficiency experts who will insist on spending an hour on a hundred-dollar item in the agenda and leave a million-dollar bond issue up to someone else. Others are thinking only of the district's attention to teaching of basic skills and worry not about the absence of an orchestra in the high school or poorly equipped science labs. A third kind of single-purpose board member tends to be more politically minded gauging his or her every response on the popularity with which a given program or policy will likely be met and reacting accordingly.

I would contend that when any of these limited purposes dominate the motivation of a board member, that person falls far short of the expectations so many parents have for them when they are elected or appointed. I also feel that schools need to change and that most schools are now falling far short of their capacity for helping young people reach their fullest potential. Your help as a board member is needed to assist in the change process and I believe you can most help to meet your responsibility for the curriculum in the four ways which I shall now discuss.

1. Help set a few significant instructional goals each year

School systems are like all other organizations - they must set priorities for themselves from among all the possible ways they could conceivably allocate their limited resources. If it is not now the practice, board members should help assure that a system is put together for developing the priority instructional needs in the district.

Such goals need to be rather clearly defined and efforts must be made to envision what the desired condition will be if the goal is attained. Later, or

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simultaneously, a school board and staff may wish to objectify how much growth in reading sp[illegible] is being sought and define more precisely to whom such instruction will be made available. This kind of goal is achievable and desirable, in my view, and illustrates a kind of goal which needs understanding and commitment from central office personnel, principals, and teachers.

A variety of methods can be used but the broadest possible participation from citizens, students, teachers, and staff will elicit better understanding and support. The Dallas school district is a good example of one community that has been extensively involved in prioritizing instructional goals. There are many others.

You may also wish to set a policy which establishes a five-year curriculum renewal cycle. This compels the professional staff to examine two or three instructional [illegible] in depth at least once within the five-year period. This is being done successfully in Toledo, Ohio and a number of other districts. It forces the system to allocate its resources in a focused manner.

More and more, districts are using a management by objectives approach to curriculum improvement. I believe this can be a very useful approach if the board and staff are equally concerned with a sense of community participation. Rarely will decision-making on such goals by a small elitist group result in very much improvement in learning experience in the classroom. Failure to develop good plans for accomplishing instructional goals tends to cause the best of ideas to "fall apart" during implementation.

2. Help obtain resources in the schools

Schools have for too long tended to isolate themselves from the community at large. In these days of declining enrollment, board members are able to spend less time on bond issues and can demonstrate a concern for the curriculum by helping the schools to reach out to those persons and institutions in their community who have much to offer in enriching the curriculum. Some examples:

For career education to succeed, the program must have a board base of support and cooperation in the business community. Board members can help elicit the support from influentials in the Chamber of Commerce or from any persons in a position to assist in providing work opportunities or in helping interpret occupations or professions to young people.

The quality and quantity of experience for students in the arts too often suffers because of failure to enlist those leaders who support the arts and cultural activities in the community. Bringing artists into the schools, providing performance opportunities for students, and many other tasks can be accomplished by board members with concern for the curriculum.

The schools need to make more use of community resource people in all phases of the curriculum. A file of persons with exciting and interesting experiences in the many instructional fields should be a part of every school system's resources.

The university community should be working in closer contact with the schools in areas where they have expertise. Isolation of these two academic worlds

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should not be tolerated and cooperation will be possible if board members exert themselves in this direction.

Community people with special concerns in this area should be encouraged to run for the board or should be appointed to bring this kind of talent to the board.

3. Help determine the change process or strategy in the system

I hope you will not underestimate how important this issue really is nor that you will feel it is out of your domain. School systems are probably no better or no worse than many businesses insofar as their ability to change themselves. But bureaucratic characteristics do set in - a hierarchy exists, rules and regulations are made, and people resist what they don't understand. When one important part of the system changes, all parts are often affected.

So I think you can quite rightly ask "How does our school system change itself?" (Some of you may say it doesn't - others may feel it is already changing too much.)

Do you know how students feel about their schools? What is the opinion of your graduates after they enter the work world or college? What is the absentee rate? How well do they perform at what is expected of them after leaving school? If information provided in response to these questions shows reason for concern, by what process does the system respond?

I believe every school system, including the board members, ought to know the various change mechanisms which are or could be used. What are some of these "change strategies" or mechanisms?

a. The Research and Development Approach

Not actually used to any great extent in education. The differential rates of investment in various industries is well known - several industries could not survive without developing new products or better service.

b. Community Involvement

This approach holds, quite simply, that people who are to be affected by a decision ought to be involved in it. And that decision should be made closer to the people it will touch. It is time consuming, often laborious, but a few school systems such as Louisville have made it work.

c. The "Systems" Approach

Concentrates on the needs assessment, prioritizing, goal setting, program development and evaluation processes. It can be carried to extremes at the expense of the personal needs of people involved (goals at all costs) but it can help hold complex projects together.

d. Alternative Schools

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This is another change mechanism which gets a bit of competition into the system. Other parents and teachers and students actually can see that different and/or better learning environments can be created thus tending to motivate other schools to change.

e. Consortium of Schools With Similar Interests

Generally within a state or fixed geographic area, the approach provides opportunities for teachers and administrators to share experiences as they seek to improve instructional practice.

f. Traditional "Strong Leader" Approach

A good bit of change has come through simply employing a person with ideas and commitment for change. Some such people are better at articulating the ideas than in convincing teachers they ought to do them. But new staff development approaches such as teacher centers are being developed to provide teachers with new skills needed.

There are other more sophisticated approaches used by a few schools. The centralization of governance to regional, state, and federal levels is also influencing how change occurs in many communities. There are strengths and weaknesses to any of the change strategies depending on how adroitly they are used. But it is essential that you understand both what the possibilities are as well as what your system is actively doing with regard to change mechanisms.

4. Evidence concern for balanced curriculum development

Many veteran board members have experienced the pendulum phenomenon in dealing with instruction. For a variety of reasons, often reflecting societal conditions, the schools go all out for change in such areas as basic skills, career education, or new ways of scheduling. In the two decades I have been in education, I've seen at least three major movements:

a. 1950's - early 60's: curriculum reform

b. 1960's: innovation

c. 1970's: accountability

Each of these has had its impact on instruction, but in a fragmental manner. We now tend to have in many schools a "patchwork" curriculum as a result of adding programs dealing with social concerns such as drug abuse, racial conflict, environmental decay, and sexuality. I have prepared the following cluster concept as a way of working in a balanced way toward broad curriculum improvement. You need to envision each cluster as a set of schooling experiences which ought to be made available to every child:

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a. Learning Skills

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Mathematics, reading, listening, writing, locational skills, self reliance, independent study, problem solving, reflective thought, and group techniques - these are illustrative of the learning skills all students need to function adequately in the other curriculum clusters.

b. Health, Physical Education, and Leisure

Experiences in this cluster would focus on physical development, understanding nutrition principles and health hazards, wise use of leisure time, and analysis of alternative life styles, and would emphasize lifetime sports on a par with interscholastic competition.

c. Career Education

This proposal may well place somewhat less emphasis on career education than would proposals by other persons. However, this field would take its place alongside other important areas of study and all students would be provided opportunities for study and discussion of the work ethic and occupational alternatives before beginning work-study experiences. Figure 2 does compel attention to the relative emphasis a school would place on this area. Curriculum development in the area should begin by careful analysis of the school's purposes in preparing youth for the work world, especially with regard to the contributions to be made by industry and those by the school district.

d. Cultural Studies

The curriculum would utilize subjects such as art, music, speech, ethnic studies, and the humanities to focus on the agreed upon concepts, understandings, and skills that are to be sought and that are best learned through the arts. This unified approach would place heavy emphasis on multicultural education as the vehicle for creating an understanding of cultural pluralism as one of the major goals of our society.

e. Societal Studies

This cluster would provide the basis for a broad citizenship education designed to improve the participation and coping skills of youth. A needs assessment process which may, for example, reveal that the community ranks citizenship fourth on a listing of goals has some initial value. Yet, such knowledge is quickly seen to have only limited value for the curriculum leader. Starting points in curriculum construction would be identification of important instructional goals related to such issues as governance, resource scarity, population, environment, interglobal dependency, the U. S. economy, poverty, and stereotyping. Such subjects as history, science, math, government, sociology, and economics would be used to deliver a unified instructional program that would help students understand the values and the social policies that are implicit in each cluster, but toward the purposes established for each area rather than as separate subjects in themselves.

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In summary, I believe the curriculum framework poses a realistic approach to encouraging board members to express a balanced concern for the curriculum. I thus raise the question of what general education is or ought to be in a democratic society. Every nation in the world relies on its school system to perpetuate its form of government and important curricular characteristics. Carried to extreme the alternative in free school movement could result in an American system of education that does neither.

I wish you well in your important governance role which can indeed express a balanced concern for curriculum improvement.